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Women Doing Theology: A Conference Report

In early 1991 I received a phone call from Kathy Shantz, director of MCC Canada Women's Concerns. She asked me whether I would be interested in serving on a committee whose task was to organize a theological conference for women. Interested? That was an understatement! As a doctoral student of theology at Toronto School of Theology, I had often felt the urge to meet other Mennonite women scholars. So had Lydia Harder, another Mennonite doctoral student also studying in Toronto, and together we had dreamed about a conference for Mennonite women theologians—and now it seemed as if this dream could become a reality.

Some aspects of the conference quickly fell into place: it was to be held April 30-May 2, 1992, on the campus of Conrad Grebel College in Waterloo, Ont., and would be co-sponsored by MCC Canada Women's Concerns and Conrad Grebel College. Other decisions were more difficult: members of the planning committee (Esther Epp-Tiessen, replacing Kathy Shantz who took a maternity leave, Lydia Harder, Arnold Snyder, John Fast and myself) had many discussions about the focus of the conference. Eventually we decided that the focus should be broad—we titled it "In a Mennonite Voice: Women Doing Theology." We wanted to address the question, "What does it mean to be a Mennonite woman engaged in theological work?" We envisioned a conference where creative worship was woven together with storytelling and academic reflection.

Our decision to invite Katie Funk Wiebe to begin the conference with her own story, which she entitled "What, Me, a Theologian?" reflected that concern. Although we decided to begin each session with a short period of worship,

we wanted one entire evening devoted to a worship service for conference participants and the general public. Patty Shelley and Renee Sauder were commissioned to plan this service.

We decided that the focus of the conference should be on the participants themselves, rather than on a keynote speaker. Small group discussion was to be an integral part of the process and we would draw on the resources of many women to provide input for these discussion groups. The conference was to begin not in theoretical discussion, but in the concrete reality of women's lives; thus the first session was devoted to social action. We asked five women to write short reflection papers on how being a Mennonite woman affected their work in various areas of need. At the conference they would form a roundtable to compare their reflections.

We solicited major papers from three other women, asking them to reflect on what it meant for them to be a Mennonite woman in their academic disciplines. At the conference each writer would participate in a roundtable discussion that would include four additional women from their area, and we encouraged the writers of the papers to be in

IN A MENNONITE VOICE:



WOMEN DOING THEOLOGY

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touch with these women during the process of writing. In this way we hoped to foster a more dialogical approach.

The *Conrad Grebel Review* agreed to publish the papers that were to be presented at the conference. In this way all participants received copies of the papers several weeks before the conference, freeing valuable time for discussion between the writer of the paper and the roundtable participants, as well as for plenary and small-group discussion.

We decided the conference should end with a celebration which would include a banquet and a performance of "Birthstory" by Carol Ann Weaver and Judith Miller.

Having planned and advertised the conference and having invited the resource people, we waited for the registrations to appear; this was a time of some nervousness for the planning committee. Would we receive enough registrations to cover the costs incurred by bringing in the resource people from across North America? We needn't have worried—as the conference approached, registrations flooded in and by the end we had filled our facilities to capacity, and even had to turn some registrants away due to lack of space!

For myself the conference was an intense collage of meeting new people, hearing stories that were hard to hear and even more difficult to tell, and experiencing a wide range of emotions in a short period of time. The overwhelming effect was one of empowerment. The isolation I had sometimes felt as a Mennonite woman doing theology vanished, and in its place was a solid feeling of community and a web of connectedness with women from all parts of the Mennonite and Brethren in Christ church.

After the conference, our planning committee met a final time to study the evaluations, which conference participants had completed. The success of this conference highlights the need for events such as this for women and men to discuss issues of gender and theology.

—Carol Penner

"Women Doing Theology" Conference Papers

Social Action

Rosalee Bender, "Locating Ourselves in 'Godbecoming'"
Dorothy Friesen, "First Steps on the Journey to
Dismantling Racism"

Mary Anne Hildebrand, "Domestic Violence: A Challenge
to Mennonite Faith and Peace Theology"

Kaye Kempel, "Women and Poverty: What is the
Church's Role?"

Lisa Schirch-Elias, "Self-Determination: The Road to
Justice"

Biblical Studies/Hermeneutics

Lydia Harder, "Biblical Interpretation: A Praxis of
Discipleship?"

Roundtable participants: Wilma Bailey, Nadine Pence
Frantz, Jo-Ann Martens

Theology

Melanie May, "The Pleasure of Our Lives as Text: A New
Rule of Christ for Anabaptist Women"

Roundtable participants: Gayle Gerber-Koontz, Ruth
Krall, Carol Penner

History

Lois Barrett, "Women's History/Women's Theology"

Roundtable participants: Joanna Buhr, Marlene Epp,
Beulah Hostettler, Gloria Neufeld Redekop

All papers were published in *The Conrad Grebel Review* Volume 10, Number 1, Winter 1992. A copy of this issue can be purchased by writing to Christine Matsuda, Conrad Grebel College, Waterloo, Ontario N2L 3G6. The cost is \$8 and checks or money orders should be made out to the college.





Memorable moments...

"...A panel of women talking authoritatively on theological studies and biblical studies, and not mentioning Barth or Bultmann or Niebuhr."
(The quotes scattered throughout this issue at page tops are memorable moments described by a variety of conference participants.)

"The presence of those men among us reminded me that we cannot 'do theology' alone; we need to allow men to walk with us as we search for their transformation too."



I first saw the advertising for "In a Mennonite Voice" some six months before the opening session. As a recent seminary grad and as a brand new pastor, I knew I needed to go—I knew I needed to talk to others who were struggling with and thinking about what it meant to be a Mennonite woman involved in theological pursuits, whether as an academic or on "the front line" as a social worker, counsellor or pastor. And so I made a note in my ever-present date book and on the appointed day and hour, I joined almost 200 other women and men at Conrad Grebel College's Great Hall for two and a half days of conversation. What we heard, talked about, laughed and cried over is recorded and recalled in this issue of *Report*.

Our backgrounds as participants were varied:

- we were professional theologians and academics, social workers, pastors, students of theology and of many other disciplines, women working at home and women working outside the home;
- we were married, single, widowed, with children and without;
- we were from six provinces and 12 states;
- we were ages 20 to 75;
- we were largely white, mainly Mennonite, mainly middle-class;
- we were of many, many theological and philosophical minds;
- we were mainly women—about 20 men were in attendance.

Most of you, the regular readers of *Report*, did not attend the conference. But we hope in this issue to let you experience some of the richness and challenge of this event. The articles which follow are not meant to be a summary of all that took place nor are they dry and precise minutes of the proceedings. Rather, they are more like a series of snapshots—individual recollections of specific topics or events. "In a Mennonite Voice: Women Doing Theology" was a significant event, one which challenged, stretched and comforted the planners, participants and presenters. We hope that this issue allows you to feel some of that with us.

—Bev Suderman

Carol Penner and Bev Suderman worked together to compile this issue of *Report*. Carol spends her time taking care of her one-year-old daughter and working on her doctoral thesis at Toronto School of Theology from her home in Vineland Station, Ont. Bev is the pastor at Erieview Mennonite Church in Port Rowan, Ont., and is a part-time counsellor for immigrant Mennonite women from Mexico.

"It is refreshing to have feeling put back into faith, to have tears in our theology. This may be the 'new thing' that God is doing among us."

"It was exciting and gratifying to see so many young women who are bringing their gifts and energy to the church, who are daring to think and say out loud what we older ones have not been able to say."

by April Yamasaki

In Search of Wholeness

Like the conference papers, the conference discussions covered a wide range of issues: from poverty to peacemaking, from history to hermeneutics, from biblical interpretation to practical application.

These and other issues raised in the plenary sessions carried over into small-group discussions and informal conversations. There, the perspectives of conference participants ranged almost as widely as the issues they discussed. Students and teachers of theology came together with those who had no formal training in the field. Ministers and other church workers met with lay people. Those who called themselves feminists sat side by side with those who would not claim that name for themselves.

More Questions than Answers

Given the variety of issues, the individual participants, and the goal of the conference to promote ongoing dialogue, it is not surprising that the conference ended without any firm conclusions. In fact, while the discussions were both thoughtful and lively, most conference participants likely left as I did—with more questions than answers.

As a reflection of this, the conference listening committee—Mary Mae Schwartzentruber, Arnold Snyder, Bev Suderman, and myself—gave its concluding report in the form of a readers' theater of questions. From what we had heard, the key issues seemed to cluster around the three words of the conference subtitle: *Women Doing Theology*. What follows is an abbreviated form of the reading presented at the final session of the conference.

Women: Who are we? Are we oppressed or are we privileged? Are we feminists or afraid to call ourselves feminists? Are we prophets or are we silenced? Are we Anabaptist? What is Anabaptist? Are we Mennonite? What is Mennonite? Are we at the center or are we on the periphery?

Doing: What are we doing? Laughing, thinking, interacting, listening, feeling, worshipping, visiting, connecting, disagreeing, singing, growing, arguing, reading, raging, pondering, celebrating, crying. Where is our action? Is this our action?



Theology: What is theology? Is it academic? Is it practical? Is it biblical? Is it about God? Is it about me? Is it about us? Is it about a text? Which text?

A Common Focus

Now as I reflect on these questions and the issues that they represent, as I think back on the conference as a whole, it seems to me that the discussions shared a common focus. Time and again, conference participants questioned the narrowness of much of traditional scholarship that has ignored the contributions of other academic disciplines as well as the contributions of our life experience. Many expressed a deep concern to relate our theology to life—in the way we participate in academic life and in the church and in the way we raise our children. Many also noted the conference's own limitations, since participants were predominantly North American, middle-class, white women. In all of this, it seems to me that the unspoken focus of our discussions centered on a search for wholeness.

For example, in the cluster of identity issues represented by the word *Women*, conference participants expressed a concern for our identity as an interpretive and theological community. To the extent that this community excludes those who are on the margins of society and church life, to the extent that it excludes the poor, to the extent that it excludes those of other races and cultures, to the extent that it excludes those who are different from ourselves, this community is incomplete.

"The substance of the conference was significant; the sharing was deeply meaningful. But the most vivid image I take with me is of the roundtable on Anabaptist history—five participants—and all of them women! When has that happened before!"

Yet the history of Anabaptist women can impact our present-day theology positively. First, their history shows how women can take on authority even within a patriarchal society. In their martyrdom, Anabaptist women showed how commitment to Christ could take precedence over the norms of the culture, including family expectations. But even more important, the phenomenon of women's prophecy combined with the Anabaptist understanding of the church has profound implications. (Lois Barrett, "Women's History/Women's Theology," p. 15)

As women, we have sometimes been excluded from this community, but in our discussions we also sought to be aware of the ways we exclude others. Is our definition of Anabaptist-Mennonite too tied to ethnic identity? Does it foster our own brand of racism? How do we stand with those on the margins and include their voices without speaking for them or taking them over? How do we relate to those from different church traditions? How did we include the few men present at the conference? In other words, how can we be a whole community?

In the cluster of issues centered around *Doing*, the theme of wholeness is again apparent. Conference participants expressed a concern not only to do theology, but to live it out. How do we handle—and even celebrate—our differences? How do we affirm our traditional roles as nurturers and yet also move beyond them to new challenges and new fields of work and study? How can we work as partners together for justice? Is there a difference between solidarity and advocacy? What do we do about the deep loneliness and pain that come with solidarity, with praxis and reflection?

As women, we may sometimes feel consigned to the periphery, or we may choose the periphery as our place to learn and work. Yet even so, conference participants recognized a certain degree of personal power: in their work and families, as active members of local churches, as educated and articulate women. We have power whether we want it or not,

whether we know how to use it or not. How can we admit to our own power? How do we use it? How can we help to empower others? In other words, how can we be whole people and how can we help others to wholeness?

Finally, in the cluster of issues around *Theology*, conference participants again dealt with questions relating to wholeness. Can biblical studies and theology really be separated as they have been in many scholarly circles? Can the meaning of a biblical text really be separated from its significance? Can our lives and feelings really be separated from our theological reflection? Many conference participants seemed to react against such fragmentary approaches and to advocate a crossing of disciplines. One comment from the conference floor seemed to sum up the view of many and even drew some applause: "Women's theology needs to be holistic and to come together to give life to the community."

Other issues under discussion related specifically to biblical interpretation. Is the meaning of a text limited to the meaning intended by the original author? Is it possible to recover that intended meaning? How does our choice of community and our choice of text influence our biblical interpretation? How do our commitments to discipleship or feminism or other regulatory principles shape our interpretation? How do we test different interpretations? Are our lives and bodies also our text?

An Invitation to Dialogue

As I reflect on the search for wholeness that seemed to characterize the conference discussions, I am also confronted by the partial nature of my own account. Although I have tried to be accurate and honest, I cannot claim to be objective. Even as I write, I am very aware how much this account and my identification of the issues must be influenced by my own background, interests and life situation. I only hope that these have been appropriately balanced by my participation on the listening committee and my discussions with other conference participants.

For a more adequate understanding of the conference discussions and of the issues raised there, further dialogue is necessary. This account is only one of the many sides to the conversation, only a part of a much larger whole. And so you are invited to join the dialogue. As the conference worship theme proclaimed, "Lift up your voice."

April Yamasaki is a scholar and writer-in-residence at Columbia Bible College in Clearbrook, B.C.

“...The astonishing, exhilarating, exhausting and radical sights and sounds of a roomful of women doing theology.”

“In the public expressions of pain and grief I realized that I am not alone. I experienced solidarity in pain and hope through the courage evident in the telling.”

“This was a historic occasion! Will it, or something like it, happen again? I hope so! This was a good beginning and there’s a long journey ahead.”

by Pamela Klassen

The Importance of Women Doing Theology Together

I begin writing these words two days after the end of the conference, during a grey day of sadness and aching. I have not slept well since the conference. My dreams are vivid and racing with images of women meeting in clandestine groups, organizing their spiritual and physical resistance to a world run by men akin to those in Margaret Atwood’s *Handmaid’s Tale*. I awake at six in the morning, fear and hope stirred up in my body. My heart pounds until I can’t bear it anymore and I reach for my diary. I furiously scribble down the images, thoughts and feelings swirling within.

I call my friends who experienced the conference with me, asking them, “How do you feel? Is this happening to you too?” They all say the same thing, “I can’t sleep at night. I can’t stop thinking about it. I can’t stop talking about it.” We cry and laugh and argue. Doing theology has gotten under our skins.

Fear and hope. These are prominent reverberations of the conference for me. Being in a room packed with women: women on the panels, women at the microphones, women singing, dancing, acting. Women speaking—and encountering the fear of speaking—about biblical interpretation, Anabaptist history, theology and social justice. In speaking, however, we find hope growing out of our diversity, our alliance and our insights.

A recurrent theme during “Women Doing Theology” was the need for women to tell their stories. Melanie May’s paper, “The Pleasure of our Lives as Text,” and Carol Penner’s moving response evocatively reinforced the importance of hearing each other speak about the struggles and joys of our experiences of being Mennonite and being women. In that vein, I talk about why the conference “Women Doing Theology” is important, through telling stories of my own life.

I grew up as the daughter of two Manitoba Mennonites who moved to Toronto after their marriage. My parents, my two older brothers and I went to a General Conference church in Toronto. When my parents separated when I was six, my mother stopped going to church. My father took us to church on his own.

We need to be suspicious of any process of biblical interpretation which separates people from each other, or which reinforces people in their separate spheres of responsibility in the church, even when it evidences itself in the seemingly innocent guise of discipleship or service. We need a way to do biblical interpretation in a collegial, noncompetitive approach. We need mutual respect and service in our relationships within the larger hermeneutic community as well as in our relationships in the congregation. (Lydia Harder, “Biblical Interpretation: A Praxis of Discipleship?” p. 32)

As a child, I never quite knew why my mother stopped going to church, but I knew it made me different than the other kids, and I knew my family did not get invited out for Sunday dinner as often as others. By the time I was a teenager, I was angry at the church. I went to Sunday school prepared with questions about Mary Magdalene: “Why don’t we talk about the claim that she was a prostitute?” I asked, wanting to force difficult issues out into the open. “Why doesn’t anybody ask me about what it’s like to have divorced parents?” was probably what I most wanted to ask, but didn’t.

Nobody talked to me about my parents’ divorce until I reached the age to be baptized. The minister called to set up a meeting. I nervously agreed. When we met in my father’s living room and I told him I was not ready to be baptized, he asked me, “Do you think it is because of your parents’ divorce?” I was furious. It felt to me like he was trying to find an excuse, a conceivable deficiency within me that could explain my unwillingness to be baptized, when I felt I was exercising the Anabaptist way.

I went off to university in Montreal and stopped going to church. I followed my brothers in choosing to study politics, but I did not follow them to Conrad Grebel College in Waterloo. I believed that through politics I could make a difference in the world, but I was determined not to go to a Mennonite college. I was sure there would not be room there for my way of being in the world.

During my political theory degree I worked doggedly at making room for my growing feminist convictions in a male-

"The only male in our group approached two of us women after the last group session and said: 'How come there's been no male-bashing? What happened? I've been waiting ...'"

"I can't wait to get to small group and hear what they have to say about this!"



dominated environment. I persistently felt tugged, however, to the religious studies building and the courses offered there. I spent many hours sitting quietly in the chapel thinking and sometimes crying. I felt a strong spiritual bond to my grandmothers and one of my grandfathers, who were all very devout Christians, but I could not mirror their piety and I could not mouth their words.

After traveling for a year in Southeast Asia, Australia and Canada, I returned to Ontario and enrolled in a Master's degree program in Religion and Culture in Mennonite-saturated Waterloo. Feeling tossed back into a world of Mennonites I was somewhat overwhelmed. I didn't start going to church. My relationship with God grew amongst supportive friends outside of a Mennonite environment. I was, nevertheless, drawn to things Mennonite. I began working on my Master's thesis with two Russian Mennonite women in their 60s. Recording and interpreting their life histories, I grappled with the women's ideas of what it is to be Mennonite women and with my analysis of the patriarchal structure of the church.

While we did not always agree, the process of writing the thesis and making a videotape of the stories of these two women allowed me to work through some of my anger with the church. As refugees from World War II, both women went through hellish experiences during the war and encountered prejudice upon coming to Canada. They emerged with profound faith and spirited wisdom and they emerged as Mennonites.

My scholarly work with Mennonite women prompted me to come to the conference, "Women Doing Theology." On the first night, after a witty and insightful talk by Katie Funk Wiebe, the participants divided up into small groups. Walking into the room, I was apprehensive about what was to come. These women looked so middle-aged, so normal, so Mennonite! How would we ever relate?

As we went around the circle telling a bit about ourselves, I forgot my apprehension. Each woman spoke of her own struggle of growing up and living within a patriarchal society. Most grew up in Mennonite homes, some did not, but we all shared a longing to find ways to articulate and live out our spirituality. There were several pastors in my group, some who spoke emotionally about the difficulties of finding a church because they were women. There were women like me who no longer went to church but still struggled with understanding a lingering attachment to their Mennonite identity.

I am deeply grateful for the vulnerability, honesty, anger and passion these women showed. They listened to my stories and met them with their own experiences. They did not see my past as a deficiency; they heard me out and understood. I found one woman particularly inspiring. Marianne Mellinger is a pastor at an urban Mennonite church, a mother, and divorced. Every time Marianne spoke she was calm, articulate and inviting. Listening to her ease with bringing up hard issues both in her own congregation and in our group showed me that the Mennonite church is capable of change. If this woman can be a pastor in the oldest Mennonite church in

"I think I will always carry with me the image of one woman at the microphone Saturday afternoon. She stood at the mike, tears in her eyes, and said, 'I am the mother of a daughter and a son. How do I keep them from ravaging and being ravaged?' The answer was clear—break the silence and lift up your voice."

All of a sudden she said to me, "Do you want to hold him? I'm so tired!" I nodded exultantly and she passed him over the pew. Looking into Carlo's eyes, basking in his smile and feeling his tiny grip on my fingers, brought me back into a soothing space. Marlene, who didn't even know me, trusted me with her child and was honest enough to speak of her own tiredness. This experience convinced me that though the raw wounds and the betrayals of growing up in a patriarchal religion and culture are still there (provoked even in services carefully planned by women), women can comfort and inspire each other and redeem our tradition by speaking about anger, tiredness, elation and joy.

While I am still not ready to join a church, this conference has shown me that there are Mennonites with whom I can be in community. The concerns motivating the women at this conference to speak, pray, sing, cry and laugh are many of the same concerns that move me in my life. That Mennonite women are finding the strength to speak in voices full of fear and hope gives me courage and energy.

Now that these voices have begun to percolate, the process must continue as women estranged from the church and women suffering from abuse, violence and poverty speak up. We need to hear from women who are not ethnic Mennonites but are part of the Mennonite community, including women of color. We need to hear from Mennonite lesbians.

For women to speak up, however, we need safe spaces. We need to actively work at setting up these spaces whether they be intimate and private or open and public. "Women Doing Theology" was a public safe space for women to begin speaking from their hearts and to each other. That the conference was full to the brim with a waiting list of hopeful participants shows that Mennonite women are ready to articulate their personal voices in a political way. The consequences of speaking out may be painful and frightening, but in the long run we will revitalize our tradition and create a community of the faithful, capable of welcoming and listening to all of its daughters and sons.

Pamela Klassen recently completed her M.A. in Religion and Culture at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo. In September she begins doctoral studies in Religion and Society at Drew University in Madison, N.J. She has made two videos about Russian Mennonite women and intends to continue working with Mennonite women. She thanks Chris Hiller, Mary Goerzen-Sheard, Lisa Schirch-Elias and Laureen Harder-Gissing for their comments and support during the conference.

North America, I thought, then maybe even I can go to church!

Different women inspired hope in me throughout the conference. For example, during the Friday night worship service I felt devastated and betrayed by what I needed to be a soothing and sacred place of worship. One of the few ways I can worship with my body, my voice, my joy and sorrow was taken from me because I cannot sing the words of God the Father and King. I was shocked with the intensity of my anger at the choice of hymns. Shocked at what felt like a raw wound in between my breasts. Shocked at my tears shaking forth from me, unstoppable, yet strengthened by my friends standing around me, all choosing silence over singing, shaking their heads and holding me.

The experience was redeemed by a woman, Marlene Dick, who sat behind me with her baby. She saw me cast aside the hymnal and tapped me on the shoulder saying, "I know that shrug!" I kept turning to look at her baby wishing I could hold him, but not daring to ask. I wanted to hold the baby to show Marlene my support, to bring her into the service as she sat alone with her baby in the back pew, leaving every time he cried, despite sermon references to women laboring and birthing.

"The sights and sounds of strong and talented women singing and preaching and telling stories and thinking and dancing and laughing and crying—ALIVE!"



I invite us to revel in this rapturous pleasure as we recognize our lives as text. Relegating the texts of tradition as context while we plumb this source of our power. While we exercise these imaginative, innovative, inquisitive energies. As we are transformed into creators of new texts, of textuality. Interweavers of what have been hidden or hated pieces of our lives. Letting all the pieces be there. Loving them. Loving ourselves. Being healed. Led by a new "rule of Christ," so to speak. And it is important so to speak. Since the traditional rule resides so deep down within us. I write to write it out of me. To make a new inscription by which to live and love as a creature created in the divine image. (Melanie May, "The Pleasure of Our Lives as Text: A new Rule of Christ for Anabaptist Women," p. 34)

by Laura Schmidt

A Variety of Voices

It remains difficult in part to process all that went on during this conference on "Women Doing Theology." A banner at the front of our main meeting room boldly stated "Lift Up Your Voice." As the weekend progressed and people responded to this challenge, I was aware of the variety of personalities, positions, experiences and emotions represented. I had to remain very still at points, going through what one participant called "the pain of the first hearing," as women told their stories of oppression, discrimination and limitation.

We talked a lot about breaking the silence, about giving voice to our various experiences in hopes of healing and of change. The anger and hurt were on occasion deafening, and because the experiences behind them were so different from my own I had to struggle to keep listening. I struggled in part because I did not want to hear that gender discrimination in ministry, church leadership and theological teaching spans generations to include young women—women my age. As Katie Funk Wiebe told the story of her struggle to use her gifts, nods of recognition set the room in motion, nods from Katie's theological granddaughters. It is discouraging to think that in many ways there has been no recognizable broadening to allow women involvement in something other than the sewing circle.

But I also found myself struggling to be willing to lift up my own voice. My voice is less angry, my experience is less marred, my theology is less radical, my methodology is less feminist. Could I have raised my voice and been heard? Could I have spoken my mind and not been thought naive or uncritical or blindly indoctrinated?

It is right for those who have been silent for so long and who have been hurt so deeply to tell their anguished stories. It is precisely because they are different than mine that I need to hear them. But in our rush to hear the new voices we must be careful that they don't become silencing themselves. It is necessary that the conversation remain a dialogue with many different participants, to understand how these experiences may in turn shape one's theology.

As we move to embrace those who no longer remain "the quiet in the land" we must keep our arms wide open to those who still speak softly, not by force but by choice. As we talk

"The entire conference was a highlight—just being in the presence of other women who struggle with similar issues has been uplifting—for body, mind and voice! What a celebration! What an affirmation for us as women!"

of partnership and mutuality instead of hierarchy and domination we must consciously create political space for those who yet find something of value in a more traditional understanding of faith and theology. A variety of voices, not a new singular voice, will help us work at the healing and change the church so desperately needs.

This conference overwhelmingly revealed how much we have to offer as women doing theology. May we see this process less as a starting over and more as a continuing on, broadening to include new conversation partners in dialogue with the old.

Laura Schmidt recently graduated from U.C. Berkeley, Calif., in English and is currently an M.Div. student at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, Calif., where she is working as an intern at a Mennonite church. She hopes to go on to do doctoral work in New Testament studies.

May our faithfulness not be measured according to the injustices we have suffered but by the justice we have helped to create. (Mary Anne Hildebrand "Domestic Violence: A Challenge to Mennonite Faith and Peace Theology," p. 80)

As I tried to reach out to people from various communities in Chicago I began to recognize the force of cultural, institutional, and personal racism. I had to face my often unrecognized or unacknowledged privilege as a white person—the ways that my personal privilege was reinforced systemically and how my willful ignorance of that stood in the way of a genuine partnership. (Dorothy Friesen, "First Steps on the Journey to Dismantling Racism," p. 67)

By Carrie Harder

Doing Theology/ Doing Justice

As I reflect on the "Women Doing Theology" conference, I recall with particular appreciation the stories of women creatively expressed through poetry, drama, song, worship center art, fresh language, autobiography, and academic and practical grassroots perspectives. And I remember the laments and tears, the laughter and celebration—honest, shared responses made possible through thoughtful conference planning. The result: a spiritual feast having much to do with "doing" theology and justice in a way most of us had never experienced before.

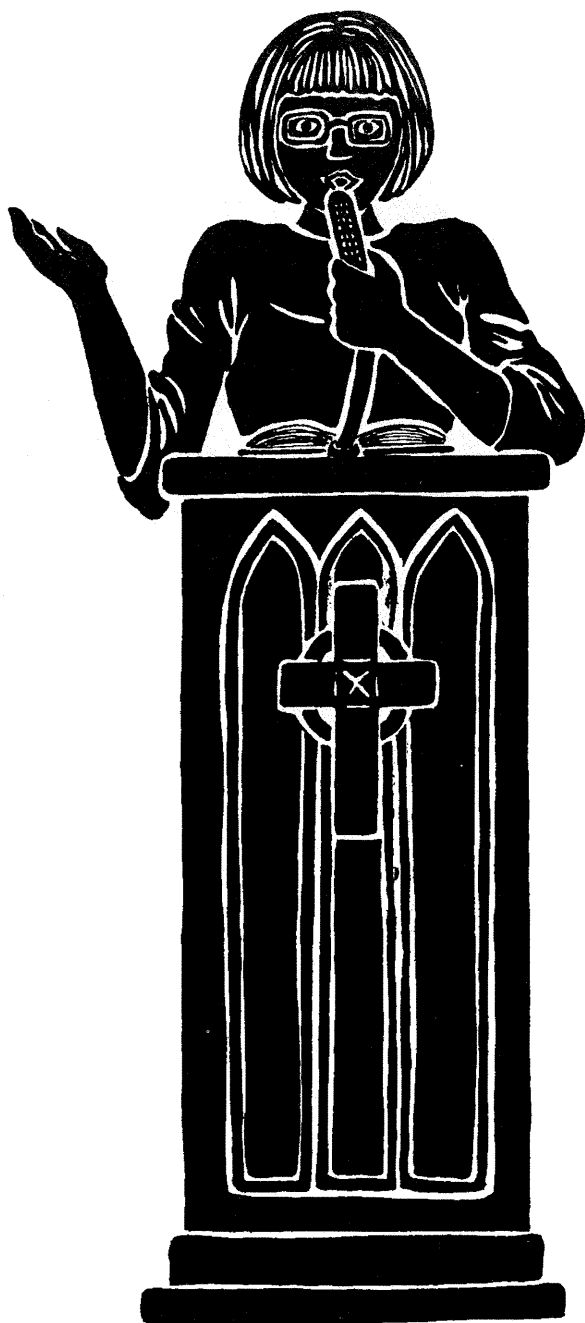
This conference helped me believe we begin doing theology by first claiming our own journeys and voices as women. Together with pastoral and academic biblicists and theologians we can make up the theological mosaic. To break the silence by sharing and shaping our stories is to own and celebrate what we as women have lived and are living through. Sadly, much of my mother's story dwells in silence, but hers—like the unnoticed stories of many women of the past—can be told at least in part through ours. It is the one precious gift we can give to their memory and as a legacy to the future generations.

But this conference also helped me become aware that I and many others have been doing theology all along. In my case, owning my story involves growing up in a minister/evangelist's home in the Midwest United States. My story includes my husband and two children, their spouses, a varied nursing career and, presently, my role as Peace and Missions Worker at Stirling Mennonite Church in Kitchener. I had often thought I'd not had the necessary theological credentials to do theology and so readily deferred such matters to others. But, as Nelle Morton has said, "In consciousness raising, women hear each other into speech."

We are engaged in doing theology and justice as we give birth and voice to our stories, and in this way risk discovering how and where God's spirit has been and continues to be present and moving in our lives.

The following collage of doing theology/doing justice images emerged for me from the conference:

"Hearing the words 'radical feminism,' and 'goddess'; hearing the call to become actively political and to dismantle patriarchy without apologies or excuses was water to my thirsting soul."



—I am OPPRESSOR AND OPPRESSED, white, privileged, a reality sandwiched somewhere between power and greed. I am CENTER AND PERIPHERY, with peoples of the world sitting at their TVs envying my “good” life as I ask, “Where are my sisters, my brothers, my earth? Where is the Godbecoming?”

—I feel ORDER AND PROPHECY, its message conditioned in my bones, the spirit of my foremothers prefiguring new beginnings.

—I see CHARITY AND SOLIDARITY, its techniques masking the harder task, and structures recreated through listening, groaning and walking with others.

—I see RACISM AND A MULTICULTURAL TABLE, a fire burning still, wiping out hope for my neighbor, yet a table set for all people.

—I see SELF AND WORLD ALIENATED, seeking a home and LIVES AS TEXT, rich in pleasurable new images, language and homecoming.

—I hear stories of BIBLICALLY-BASED SUBMISSION and voices calling for a NEW PEACE THEOLOGY that includes women and children.

—I envision “REDEMPITIVE RESISTANCE” (Gayle Gerber Koontz’ words) as a nonviolent ethic and method for addressing unjust relationships and structures, and a NEW HEAVEN AND A NEW EARTH with right relationships generated within an ethic of partnership.

Carrie Harder is a member of the pastoral team at Stirling Avenue Mennonite Church in Kitchener, Ont.

The history of the First Nations witnesses that paternalism results in injustice and ongoing conflicts with people struggling to regain control of their lives. By observing the First Nations’ struggle for self-determination, I have come to believe that discovering and using our own power as Mennonite women is the first step in creating right relations. By learning to respect each other’s right to be self-determining, we can work together to create right relationships with each other. While we obviously cannot work on all of the issues thirsting for justice, we can be advocates for right relations throughout the world by modeling respectful relations in our home and communities. The road to justice will be built on some degree of self-determination for each person, community, and nation. (Lisa Schirch-Elias, “Self-Determination: The Road to Justice,” p. 84)

"I remember the delightful feeling of freedom and humor when we heard about Miriam's brother's burning bush experience."

"I believe with my heart that the reverence, the joy and the glory of the worship service on Friday night genuinely pleased the heart of God. I was comforted in knowing that I am not alone in the pain of my oppression nor in the desire to accomplish the will of God in my life—especially because I have been blessed by being a woman. I praise the Lord!"

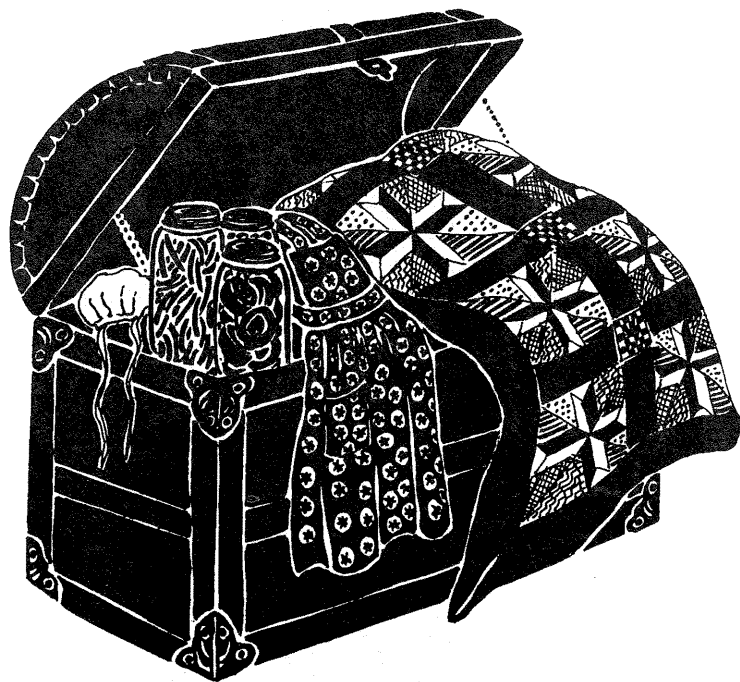
by Sylvia Shirk Charles

Experience in the Small Group

As the Saturday morning roundtable session on biblical studies drew to a close, I found I had lots of questions. In a typical conference, I may have become frustrated at not having time to ask my questions from the mike on the floor. But at the "Women Doing Theology" conference, I knew I would meet my small group just after the session, and there would be plenty of time to ask my questions. Dialogue was encouraged by the conference structure—from published paper to panel response to discussion from the floor to small-group discussion.

The conference planners gave us a choice of an all-women or mixed discussion group, and I opted for the former. The women in my group were alike in that we all listened; in other ways we were diverse. Our ages spanned possibly 30 years. Some of us had not learned our theology in schools; some were currently seminary students. Some of us spoke quite a bit; one never spoke again after the initial round of introductions. As a group we were women who had borne children, served in overseas church assignments, survived childhood sexual abuse, worn cape dresses and coverings, entered the Mennonite church from atheist and Quaker backgrounds, counselled survivors of domestic violence, toyed with the idea of leaving the church altogether, pastored a church....

Our group had a designated facilitator, but it never seemed that she had any trouble launching the discussion. Very quickly I felt I was in the company of women who were ready to listen, who were willing to share pain and hope. We spoke our doubts and questions about our church's christology, about holding together mothering and professional work, about feminist alternatives to traditional ways of doing theology. We talked about some of the pain and despair we and other women have experienced in the church, and about the hope that keeps us in the struggle. During the conference I listened to many strong and capable women.



Thanks to my small group experience, I also knew that my voice had been heard. I left the "Women Doing Theology" conference feeling uplifted by a new awareness that I belong to a vital community of Mennonite women theologians.

Sylvia Shirk Charles recently moved to Goshen, Ind., where she is a pastor at Waterford Mennonite Church. She previously lived in Somerville, Mass., where she completed seminary training at Episcopal Divinity School, and worked in Cambridge, Mass., as a certified court interpreter of Haitian Creole. She and her husband have three school-age children.

"The Friday evening worship service led entirely by women was both uplifting and inspiring—truly a highlight and celebration of women's many spiritual gifts."

"Worship—it was a highlight of a brightly lit weekend. The only thing is now that I experienced it, how shall I find traditional worship enough?"

"Patricia Shelley's sermon—naming God and seeing God from a new perspective..."

"The closing song Friday night was one of those moments in life—suddenly everyone around me was in tears. The woman beside me, whom I didn't know, reached to hold me. My heart was full."

The word "becoming" is an image, a divine image. Godbecoming is seen in the places where creative transformation is occurring. It is our hope. It is located with us in history. Godbecoming is an image which the people of the periphery incarnate. Their spirituality is one of resistance, rooted in this hope. The body is the site of that resistance: the body scarred, the body colored/white, the body female/male, the body located. (Rosalee Bender, "Locating Ourselves in 'Godbecoming,'" p. 55)

by Lynne Williams

Windows to God

Worship, according to Mr. Webster, occurs when people express reverence for their deity. Worship can be both individual and communal. Any rite carried out by a community showing their veneration of their God is worship. So how did I, as a Mennonite woman at the "Women Doing Theology" conference, express my reverence for my Judaic, Christian God? Let me count the ways...

The Bible has always been presented to me as the main source of information about our Christian God. But the Bible has had little power for me in my adult life. So, hearing the biblical story of Mary and Martha through a drama, written and performed by Cheryl Nafziger-Leis, gave me a profound sense of how my God was real to the women with whom

Jesus related. As a person who has always identified more with Martha than Mary, Cheryl's portrayal of Martha hit home territory for me: her struggle to know God in her strengths and weaknesses seemed so similar to my own.

Hearing myself included in music, particularly in the age-old familiar hymns, moved the core of my being. Singing about the "faith of our mothers, sisters and brothers" as well as that of our fathers brought to me a sense of identification with the deity which we proclaim. The music sung in a variety of languages created for me a sense of belonging to the global human community which is all part of God's creation. Although the gathering song which we used before each of the sessions was a very exclusive one—it spoke of the gathering of *women*—it sure felt good to *not* be the gender which was excluded by the lyrics.

Seeing and hearing about symbols of my identity as a Mennonite woman created comfort for me and expanded the horizons of my identity. The trunk which was on stage during the entire conference overflowed with familiar symbols: a quilt, an apron, home canned vegetables, a prayer covering. When Cheryl dramatized some experiences of a noblewoman who converted to Anabaptism and of a woman who printed materials for the Anabaptists in the 16th century, I felt supported. I recognized the Deity whom I worship in the stories of these women from my tradition.

The Friday evening worship service at Erb Street Mennonite Church was a jolt for me. Could this God whom I had been experiencing in a deeply personal way in the conference setting be worshipped in this not-so-protected setting? Although the service was marvelous, and the women who planned and carried it out did a superb job, I nonetheless was struggling with a conflicting awareness between the feminine spirit and this patriarchal setting. But, as we sang and swayed to the final hymn, I was brought again to the awareness of my God.

Finally, I knew I was worshipping as I came to recognize the mystery of my God in the stories shared by the women in my small group. Each of their theological, inner and life struggles opened a window to God for me which I could only know through their stories. Coming into relationship with others who are also seeking God expands my awareness of Her presence and the awesome inclusiveness of Her being.

Lynne Williams is a homemaker with two daughters and a part-time student of theology. She is a member of the Valleyview Mennonite Church in London, Ontario.

Women in Ministry

- **Joy Lapp** has completed a term as interim pastor at Lawrence (Kan.) Fellowship and has begun Ph.D. studies in New Testament at Iliff School of Theology in Denver. She is also serving as part-time pastor of Fort Collins (Colo.) Mennonite Fellowship.
- **Sally Schreiner** has been licensed to ministry at Reba Place Fellowship in Evanston, Ill.
- **Julia Miller Simpkins** was licensed and installed at Bacavi (Ariz.) Mennonite Church on August 16.

Letters

This letter is in response to a letter that appeared in the May-June 1992 report, asking how couples have dealt with the decision of having children when they are not in agreement. This is our personal experience and we give permission for it to be shared in *Report*.

My husband and I both agreed on giving birth to our first child. Our daughter was born by natural prepared childbirth. My husband was allowed in the delivery room (this was 1970 when permission was not routinely given for husbands to be present at birth). The entire experience was an exhilarating one for me, one that I wanted to repeat.

However, my husband didn't agree. He is a school counselor, and having counseled teenagers from dysfunctional families, he realized that no matter how effective he was in helping children to cope, their home situation was unlikely to change. Therefore, he felt that we should adopt instead of having a second biological child. Through adoption we could provide children with a loving family. Overpopulation was another consideration.

Many discussions failed to change either partner's position. Finally, we agreed to set aside a day for prayer and fasting, and seek God's will. We did this, and by the end of that day, each of us was willing to accept the other's viewpoint. I was willing to adopt, and my husband was willing to have a second biological child. God had truly answered our prayers. We decided that if conception did not occur within three months, we would start the process of adoption. With God's continued guidance, our second daughter was born and since then we have adopted two sons and are in the process of adopting several more who have already been living in our home and who come from Laos and Korea.

—Lois Beck, Grantham, Pa.

I've been receiving the *Report* for the last few years and it has been a source of encouragement and inspiration for my life. As a psychologist I have a dream—to have *women* as the subject of a post-graduation thesis. I don't have a concrete plan as to when that will happen. That's why I'm calling it a dream right now. In the meanwhile I'll keep on collecting and studying as much information as I can about this subject. That's why *Report* has been so important for me. Thank you for all of you who have made this newsletter a reality. May God continue blessing your work and lives.

—Kedma Campos Rix, Morungaba, Brazil



This past week I received the July-August issue [Native Women]. I would like to suggest other books that should be in your resource files.

1. *Writing the Circle: Native Women of Western Canada* by Jeanne Perreault and Sylvia Vance, NeWest Press, 1990. Native women tell their stories; excellent book.

2. *Those Who Know: Profiles of Alberta's Native Elders* by Dianne Meili, NeWest Press, 1991. Includes both men and women.

3. *Without Reserve: Stories from Urban Natives* by Lynda Shorten, NeWest Press, 1991. Also includes both women and men.

- **Jeanne Rempel** has been licensed as minister of church care at Peace Fellowship in Rancho Cucamongo, Calif.
- **Nada Sellers** has been licensed for part-time work at First Mennonite Church, Upland, Calif.
- **Paula and Tim Diller Lehman** are new co-pastors of Faith Mennonite Church, Minneapolis.

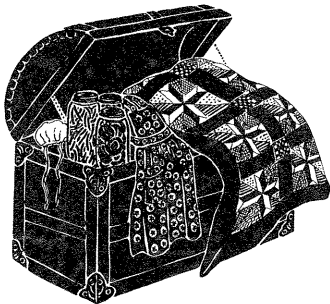
4. *White Lies (for my mother)* by Liza Potvin, NeWest Press, 1992. An account of incest. Potvin "writes a sparse and lyrical narrative to the mother she longs for."

Continue the good work of keeping us informed and encouraging us to be involved.

—Tena Wiebe, Edmonton, Alta.

News and Verbs

- **Sharon Irvin** of Los Angeles, Calif., is the new Mennonite Church representative to the MCC U.S. Committee on Women's Concerns (CWC). She is a member of Prince of Peace Anabaptist Fellowship in Los Angeles, where she is a Bible teacher and a financial and legal advisor for the church. Sharon holds degrees in accounting and law. As a senior auditor for the federal government, she also serves as the Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) special emphasis program manager for individuals with handicaps. She has worked as a counselor with rape victims and battered women, and is a volunteer tutor in her community.
- A **Women in Pastoral Ministries** Conference is planned for April 26-27, 1993, at Conrad Grebel College, Waterloo, Ont. Its purposes are 1) to reflect on a female way of being in ministry and female ways of living with authority, 2) to explore the joys and challenges of male-female pastoral staff settings, and 3) to examine career paths for women in ministry. For information contact Catherine Hunsberger, MCEC, 60 New Dundee Rd., Kitchener, ON, N2G 3W5.
- "Breaking Silence: Bringing Hope" is the theme of a Great Lakes **conference on abuse** to be at the Mennonite Church of Normal, Ill., March 5-6, 1993. For information, contact MCC Great Lakes, Box 82, Kidron, OH 44636.
- "Shedding Light on Darkness" was a **conference on family violence and sexual abuse**, held Oct. 30-31 in Clearbrook, B.C. Sponsors were MCC B.C. Committee on Women's Concerns, MB Board of Family Ministries, Conference of Mennonites Education Committee, Columbia Bible College, Columbia Christian Counseling Group, and MCC Canada Mental Health Program.
- Lois Barrett of Wichita, Kan., has been named executive secretary for the **Commission on Home Ministries** of the General Conference Mennonite Church. She has served as pastor at the Mennonite Church of the Servant in Wichita since 1983.
- Katie Funk Wiebe is editing *Life After 50: A Positive Look at Aging in the Faith Community*. This book, to be published next spring by Faith and Life Press, follows two regional inter-Mennonite conferences on aging.
- Marjorie Warta, professor of home economics at Bethel College in North Newton, Kan., has been named the 1992 **Outstanding Home Economist** by the Kansas Home Economics Association.
- **Elsa Redekopp**, former member of the Committee on Women's Concerns, died of cancer July 20. Elsa, who resided in Winnipeg, was an accomplished violist and the writer of three children's books.
- Florence Driedger of Regina, Sask., has been appointed to the **Native Ministries Board** of Conference of Mennonites of Canada.
- Carla Reimer of Toronto has been named **news service editor** for the General Conference Mennonite Church, succeeding Beth Hege. She has taught at Woodstock International School in India, and most recently worked as project coordinator for the Urban Alliance on Race Relations in Toronto.
- Vernie Lee Gehman and Susan Yoder Gingerich have joined the executive committee of the **Women's Missionary and Service Commission** (WMSC). Vernie Lee lives in Atmore, Ala., and is the first United Native Ministries representative to the committee. Susan lives in Iowa City, Iowa.
- WMSC will focus on the **needs of ethnic students** for its 1992-93 annual giving project. WMSC will give two \$1,500 scholarships to United Native Ministries students in the pastoral ministries program at Hesston (Kan.) College. They will also give \$2,000 to the African-American Mennonite Association for travel to AAMA's 1992 assembly in Los Angeles, and \$1,000 toward ethnic youth scholarships to Philadelphia '93.



Illustrations in this issue were drawn by Teresa Pankratz of Chicago, except for the conference symbol on page 1, which is by Mary Lou Schwartzentruber of Ontario. Please do not reproduce without permission.

- Shirley H. Showalter, professor of English at Goshen (Ind.) College has been elected to the directing board of the **American Association for Higher Education**.
- Mary Oyer is visiting professor of music at Bluffton College for the fall semester. She will teach a course on **African Music**, focusing on music of selected ethnic groups of Africa south of the Sahara.
- Marcia Kauffman of Harrisonburg, Va., is serving as **music artist-in-residence** on the Eastern Mennonite College campus during the 1992-93 academic year.
- MCC has produced a **packet on sexual abuse by pastors and professionals**, "Crossing the Boundary: Professional Sexual Abuse." The packet is available for \$5 from the *Report* editor or any MCC office.
- Senator Alan Cranston of California, who chairs the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee, described **sexual assault and rape within the military** as "one of our deepest military secrets." According to information reported by Senator Cranston, an estimated 60,000 out of 1.2 million female veterans may have been raped or assaulted while serving in the military. (from the May-June 1992 *Reporter for Conscience Sake*)

And finally — Some young pranksters got more than they bargained for when they called the Altona (Man.) United Church one evening and got Myrna Stark, co-pastor. "Is God there?" they asked. "Speaking," said Stark. Silence. "Thought God was a man," they said. "Guess again," said Stark. Click. (from the July *United Church Observer*)

WOMEN'S CONCERNS REPORT is published bimonthly by the MCC Committee on Women's Concerns. The committee, formed in 1973, believes that Jesus Christ teaches equality of all persons. By sharing information and ideas, the committee strives to promote new relationships and corresponding supporting structures in which men and women can grow toward wholeness and mutuality. Articles and views presented in REPORT do not necessarily reflect official positions of the Committee on Women's Concerns.

WOMEN'S CONCERNS REPORT is edited by Kristina Mast Burnett. Layout by Janice Wiebe Ollenburger. Correspondence and address changes should be sent to Kristina Mast Burnett, Women's Concerns, MCC, P.O. Box 500, Akron, PA 17501-0500.

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